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AUTHOR Duda, R.
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ABSTRACT

The recent development of the communicative approach to foreign language instruction has been accompanied by many methodological applications, most of which have revolved around an authentic use of discourse. This evolution in language instruction presents some problems, especially when communicative competence is interpreted too narrowly. Some practitioners and theoreticians are beginning to reexamine the pertinence of a differentiated training in language skills and aptitudes. These considerations have led to an examination of the status and treatment of linguistic aptitudes as they are presented in teaching materials presently available and in the framework of training in communicative competence. The linguistic aptitudes or skills in question fall into four categories: psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, linguistic, and pedagogical. Specific training in these skills may be more economical for the learner and enable the learner to take short-term needs into account, to progress at different speeds in different skills, and to have more scope for self-direction. (Author/AMH)

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MELANGES PEDAGOGIQUES 1979

R. DUDA

ARE LANGUAGE SKILLS IRRELEVANT ?

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

C.R.A.P.E.L.

RESUME

Le développement récent de l'approche communicative s'est accompagné d'applications didactiques variées, pour la plupart tournées vers une utilisation authentique du discours (simulations, prises de décisions, transferts et échanges d'informations, etc.). Il s'agit là d'une évolution positive de la didactique en matière d'enseignement des langues. Cependant, cette évolution dans son état actuel, présente un certain nombre d'inconvénients, liés en particulier à une interprétation restrictive de la notion de compétence de communication. Il s'avère en effet que l'on assiste actuellement à un début de remise en cause par certains praticiens et théoriciens de la pertinence d'un entraînement différencié des aptitudes langagières. Cet article examine le statut et le traitement des aptitudes langagières tels qu'ils se présentent dans le matériel didactique actuellement disponible ainsi que dans le cadre de l'entraînement à la compétence de communication. La spécificité des aptitudes langagières et l'avantage que présente leur entraînement différencié sont également présentés.

Over the last few years there have been a number of developments in second and foreign language training which have called in question methods prevalent since the 1960s. Among those developments the following have been the most " popular " : task-oriented teaching, role-playing, simulations, pairs-practice, multi-media material, communicative competence, intensive use of authentic materials, specific practice in language skills, self-direction, self-assessment.

These " methods " and " approaches " are all based on various philosophical, linguistic and pedagogical theories, criteria, beliefs or simply intuitions. Therefore there is no organic relationship between most of them to the extent that we can in fact witness contradictions and discrepancies in their application.

In this article I shall concentrate on specific training of language skills at University and Adult Education levels, which C.R.A.P.E.L. has been investigating and developing for several years (Kuhn, 1970).

Despite the considerable number of courses and materials geared to specific skills which are currently available, much has yet to be said about what is actually taught and how in these courses and materials. Furthermore, the present development of the " communicative " approach to language teaching/learning has tended to obfuscate the specificity of language skills at a time when the teaching community in general has not entirely become aware of the reasons for and the full implications of specific training of skills.

Language skills and teaching materials.

At first sight, the large number of books and manuals purporting to teach reading or writing or listening comprehension appears to indicate that the concept of distinct training of those skills is now widely accepted and applied. Closer scrutiny however reveals that in fact, in many cases, lurking behind skill-specific titles, traditional views concerning language acquisition still hold. For instance, reading comprehension text-books often incorporate productive exercises, either in the form of questions to be answered orally (!) or morpho-syntactic manipulations.

A book on writing on the other hand incorporates oral dialogues to present linguistic material or to introduce basic conventions of business letter writing !..

Examples of this type of reliance on several skills in books or material geared, in theory, to the training of one particular skill, are plentiful. They are

indicative of certain theories about language learning and language learners which deserve scrutiny in so far as they are widely accepted by language teachers.

(i) Linguistic knowledge (and consequently communicative competence) can be described in terms of constituent generating elements, mastery of which should ensure appropriate linguistic (and therefore communicative) behaviour by the learner, whatever communicative or linguistic requirements are to be met [1].

(ii) Practice in productive skills (speaking or writing) reinforces linguistic knowledge generally, and therefore receptive skills in particular.

(iii) Communicating is the ability to express one's beliefs, intentions and desires effectively and appropriately.

(iv) Language learners should ultimately acquire as comprehensive a mastery of the target language as possible. They in fact wish to, even when they have to start with moderate, short-term objectives. It would therefore run contrary to our roles as language teachers to ignore this and not to provide our learners with the opportunity of expanding their overall knowledge of the target language.

(v) Students who are active in class (i.e. speak a lot) are better learners than quiet students.

There are, however, a number of objections to be made against these theories, or rather, preconceptions about language learning, language learners and communication. The previous statements will not be discussed one after the other. The following comments should be considered as a blanket attempt to refute them.

(i) Despite the generating capacities of sets of grammatical rules, which cannot be denied, there is no certainty whatever that a sentence which has been appropriately *produced* (from a grammatical point of view), and which is characterized by acceptable lexis and intonation, will prove to be an utterance which is appropriately *used*.

[1] " I think we should assume (unless we are clearly told otherwise), that the student does not want to learn new skills, such as writing summaries, or analysing discourse, that he does not already possess ; but that he simply wants to learn English, because he lacks an adequate command of the *language* — because his grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are not adequate for his communicative purpose ", (Swan, 1979).

(ii) There is little or no transfer from productive skills (in particular, speaking) to receptive skills (e.g. aural comprehension). In fact, the little evidence we have seems to indicate the contrary [2].

(iii) Receptive requirements are different from and greater than productive requirements. This is also true of the mother-tongue. When speaking, we never put to use all the linguistic material that we are capable of understanding.

(iv) It follows from (ii) and (iii) that no end of oral expression training will ever ensure adequate aural comprehension.

(v) Language skills cannot be defined only in discoursal or linguistic terms, but should also be construed as combinations of sub-skills or interpretive/constructive procedures (skimming, scanning, prediction, imitation, recall, organization, comparison...) which can only be developed and acquired by actually being practised. The argument whereby educated learners of foreign languages have already mastered most of these sub-skills is true only up to a point. In fact, foreign language learning often provides students with the opportunity of developing their reading, writing and speaking skills *generally*, that is, including reading, writing and speaking in their mother tongue (on condition that the word " skills " here is interpreted in its communicative/rhetorical sense). Alternatively, some " skilled " language users tend to " forget " their skills when communicating in a foreign language, and need some coaching in order to start applying them in the foreign language.

(vi) Communication is every bit as much a question of understanding others as expressing oneself. This trivial remark, as is the case with many so-called " trivial " remarks, needs repeating over and over again, in consideration of the current trend towards the teaching of communicative competence as distinct from purely linguistic competence. This is a very desirable trend, but communication in this context is being construed too often as the ability to express oneself appropriately, and the whole issue of comprehension as part of the communicative process is being overlooked, except in the " situationally " defined cases of note-taking at lectures (McDonough, 1978) and reading.

(vii) A final preconception about the language class that is inherent in much of the published material currently available is that the class should take

[2] The distinction between writing and reading is probably not as clear-cut as the distinction between speaking and aural comprehension. Let's consider the case of scientists having to write articles or reports in a foreign language. Scientists usually acquire the linguistic and rhetorical know-how which they need in order to write acceptable articles through *reading* their specialized literature. However, through the process of *writing* reports or articles they also acquire and develop greater awareness and knowledge of the type of discourse they are in contact with daily.

place primarily in the target language (TL). This explains the obsession with oral question/answer activities in the TL which are suggested in most books, regardless of the main skill to be practised. Admittedly, constant use of the TL, especially in second language situations and with groups of intermediate and advanced students is either inevitable or highly desirable. However, much can be said in favour of using the mother tongue when teaching linguistically homogeneous groups, either in second language (see Gremmo, 1978, p. 30 et sq.) or foreign language settings.

Recourse to the mother tongue has two main advantages :

a) it can be a very economical short-cut to useful, and sometimes crucial, information, especially for beginners. Most teachers are aware of this, and sometimes with fine disregard for official instructions, theory, philosophy or whatever, they fall back on the mother-tongue when it is obviously the best thing to do.

b) using the mother-tongue when practising receptive skills helps the learner to recognize the specificity of these skills in relation to the specificity of the authentic material which is (or should be) used when practising aural or reading comprehension. That is, radio and television material is meant to be listened to/viewed, and written material to be read silently for various individual purposes. Subsequent or quasi-synchronous productive activities (comments or give-and-take about a programme or a text, note-taking during a lecture) are genuine and legitimate activities, but are dependent on adequate listening or reading comprehension. Therefore, if we can convince the learners to dissociate between the receptive and productive phases of a complex activity such as " talking about a television programme or a newspaper article " that has been watched or read, we can then help them simplify their learning tasks, and unload, as it were, the burden on their learning capacities.

I shall return to this crucial point later. I might add, however, that one of the obvious reasons behind overall use of the target-language in currently available material is that most of the material is aimed at a world-wide audience [3]. This of course poses the problem of self-contained teaching manuals *versus* methodological hand-books aimed at the teacher. The growing awareness that particular audiences need particular treatments might gradually, so we may hope, result in an increase of the latter at the expense of the pre-processed, " here-it-is, -take-it-as-it-is " type of material.

[3] To the extent that in manuals geared to the training of reading comprehension in English for instance, instructions, explanations and questions are provided in English, which would seem to suggest that the learners are already quite proficient in reading English ! Having lost an Empire, Britain has now replaced it with text-books on which the sun should never set... (with a bit of commercial luck).

Language skills and communicative competence.

The recent upsurge of interest in the communicative approach to language teaching/learning has unfortunately not corroborated the validity of skill-specific practice. In fact, the communicative approach, as mentioned earlier, has tended to obliterate, in a sense, the relevance of language skills as an operational concept in language teaching/learning. There are two main reasons for this :

(i) The misinterpretation of communication as a purely " productive " phenomenon which was criticized earlier.

(ii) The more crucial issue of the relative status of " learning " *versus* " using " the target language.

One of the tenets of the communicative approach is that communication being, among other things, language in action (discourse), communicative competence should be acquired by " *doing* things with words ", by using language in a meaningful way, by using it to solve problems, share information, carry out tasks and so on. This is certainly a tremendous improvement on earlier conceptions of language learning, where the only tasks to be met were doing grammatical exercises properly, translating and/or reading passages aloud as well as possible, and subjecting oneself, parrot-like, to structural drilling.

Learning by doing is therefore an attempt to replicate genuine communication, or at least some aspects of genuine communication. This sort of replication is going to take place in a classroom in most cases, and occasionally outside the classroom in the case of second-language training. The activities involved will either concentrate on developing the students' oral expression, or require that several skills be used concurrently. We have already mentioned the limited view of communication which accounts for the first type of activity. The second type of (multi-skill) activity (MSA) is being justified on the basis of the following hypotheses :

(i) Skills have " features " in common, and when learners practice MSAs, they acquire these common core features which in turn enable them to develop their overall linguistic and communicative competence.

(ii) It follows that the ability to learn and ways of learning are just as crucial as actual acquisition of linguistic/communicative competence. Therefore, it is essential that learners have access to varied multi-media materials :

" The mode (or channel) of communication seems to be a significant additional factor influencing learning strategies. Different students prefer different modes and are more successful if learning is allowed to focus on the preferred

mode " (Candlin, 1977). " As a result of this hypothesis, our materials are multi-media, with written texts (reading passages, pictures and charts), sound tapes, slides, movies and video tapes ". (Shinnerer, 1978).

The question we may ask here is *what* are the students " more successful in learning " ? Obviously, if a student feels more comfortable with written material and therefore probably has the impression that s/he is learning adequately, what s/he is going to acquire first and foremost is a greater competence in the written skills. No doubt some of what s/he will learn through these skills (i.e. lexis and some greater grammatical awareness, if s/he has practice in writing) will eventually have some effect on his/her *linguistic* competence in oral expression. But there is no guarantee whatever that his/her *communicative* competence in understanding or speaking spoken language will benefit from what has been acquired through the written mode.

I am not trying to imply that a multi-media approach or MSAs are ineffectual and should be avoided. On the contrary, C.R.A.P.E.L. is very much in favour of diversifying learning/teaching material (on condition of course that diversification is consistent with learners' needs and objectives). As for MSAs we propose a number in our courses principally to post-intermediate and advanced students, and never at the expense of skill-specific activities.

What the quotation above, however, seems to be implying is that what is being learnt is a set of generative learning and communicative capacities in relation to which language skills become somewhat irrelevant[4].

In our opinion, what makes language skills very relevant as valid learning objectives is what makes them different from each other. We have very little data on what features skills may have in common, but we know more about what makes them different. C.R.A.P.E.L. suggests that there are four sets of differential features of language skills : psycho-linguistic, socio-linguistic, linguistic and pedagogical (Holec, 1977 ; Régent, 1979).

a) Psycho-linguistic features :

Receptive skills require the listener/reader to perceive and then to discriminate/decipher strings of morphemes and finally to decode and process them (for a detailed analysis of aural comprehension as a process see Holec, 1970).

Productive skills on the other hand require appropriate recall, selection and organisation of linguistic, para-linguistic, kinesic or graphic items.

[4] This in fact is not borne out entirely by other passages in the article referred to.

The role of memory, finally, will vary considerably, depending on which skill is operating.

b) Socio-linguistic features :

Discourse is organized differently depending on whether it is oral or written, or written to be oralized, as in a lecture for instance. Appropriate communication will require correct interpretation or use of the semantic and formal systems of the TL at word, sentence, utterance and discourse levels, including kinesic, para-linguistic, or graphic characteristics of discourse. Discourse also depends on the respective status and roles of the interlocutors.

Furthermore, the average language user's needs as regards comprehension and expression are quite different.

« ... Le degré de « performance » exigible pour qu'il y ait communication varie sensiblement selon qu'il s'agit de comprendre ou de s'exprimer : alors que le sujet parlant ou écrivant bénéficie d'une marge d'initiative, d'un certain libre-arbitre linguistique, le sujet écoutant ou lisant est soumis à la contrainte permanente des multiples réalisations phoniques ou graphiques. » (Kuhn, 1970).

c) Linguistic features :

It is now generally accepted that written and oral discourse vary considerably in purely linguistic terms. Furthermore, not all communicative or discursive functions are used in all kinds of discourse. For instance, threats and orders do not generally occur in scientific articles.

It follows therefore that skills will require specific grammatical and communicative practice. The concept of the " pedagogical grammar " needs extending to that of the " skill specific pedagogical grammar " (Duda, 1975). C.R.A.P.E.L. has published material geared to receptive skills (Holec, 1973 ; Cembalo, Esch and Hildenbrand, 1973 ; Abe, Duda, 1975) and produced *ad hoc* material for productive skills (e.g. a course in writing telexes for a boiler-making company). Grammar therefore is not construed as a set of generative or interpretative rules common to all skills but as a combination of both common-core and skill specific rules and/or features.

d) Pedagogical features :

Experience shows that progress in comprehension is much faster than in expression. Thus, there is a case for separating the training we provide for receptive and productive skills, particularly as regards the materials we can

offer. Materials for the training of productive skills usually reflect the reduction which we operate in the gamut of linguistic materials at our theoretical disposal whenever we express ourselves (can they do otherwise ?). On the contrary, receptive skills need to be trained through as wide a range of realizations and versions of the TL as possible (in relation of course to the learner's needs, objectives and tastes). That is why we use authentic material at C.R.A.P.E.L. from the very outset of our teaching programmes, irrespective of the learners' initial knowledge of the TL.

One of the major weaknesses, in fact, of comprehensive courses (i.e. courses purporting to train learners in two skills (or more) by use of an all-purpose set of texts) lies in the irrelevance of most of the texts, dialogues or conversations in relation to aural comprehension (or reading comprehension for that matter).

In consideration therefore of the specificity of language skills, as defined above, we can assume that different learning abilities will be needed and that common-core learning abilities will not suffice to ensure adequate acquisition of language skills.

In view of this, some multi-skill activities might prove to be inappropriate in so far as that they represent too much of a burden on the learning capacities of the students. This stems from the fact that little or no distinction is drawn between acquisition and actual use of linguistic/communicative competence in accordance with the principle that acquisition is best enhanced by attempted replication of " genuine " use of discourse.

What is being overlooked is that the sub-skills and/or strategies which constitute the macro-skills need independant consideration in order to ensure speedier, more efficient acquisition. There is therefore a case, at least in the initial stages of the learning process for separating *acquisition* of the sub-skills or strategies (through appropriate exercises which will probably smack of the genuine in any case) from their combined *use* in replications of realistic communicative activities. By " initial stages " here, I do not necessarily mean " learning by beginners ". Many non-beginners in fact need coaching in various sub-skills and strategies as suggested earlier, not to mention the macro-skills themselves, in particular aural comprehension, which is notoriously under-trained in secondary schools and in most institutions of Higher Education. Too systematic a use of MSAs has a further disadvantage. They become a " pretext " for avoiding specific training of language skills, as this tends to be a somewhat less " enjoyable " way of learning a language. Another very simple reason for side-stepping specific training is that few teachers have had adequate experience in specific training of language skills and will therefore take more readily to activities which bear a greater resemblance to the kind of activities with which they are already familiar.

This raises the crucial issue of the respective status of teachers and learners in the context of the communicative approach to language teaching/learning. The communicative approach relies heavily on group-work, simulaions, role-playing, multi-skill activities and in its cruder variation on oral expression practice at the expense of aural comprehension. It is demonstrably a teacher-centered approach in so far as most of the above activities are dependent on very active and imaginative teachers. Little scope is left for learner responsibility and preparation to self-direction, precluded as they are by the very nature of the activities.

Specific practice in language skills, on the other hand, affords tremendous opportunities for introducing students to self-direction by way of giving the students responsibility for selection of materials, definition of objectives and methods and assessment of progress accomplished.

This short article should by no means be construed as a wholesale indictment of the communicative approach. It is clearly a valid approach, on condition that its implementation does not preclude specific training of language skills in consideration of the tremendous advantages that kind of training can offer.

Specific training in language skills is more economical for the learner because a) it implies less demand on his/her learning abilities,

b) it can take short-term needs into account,

c) it enables learners to progress more rapidly in certain skills (particularly receptive skills) than in others,

d) it offers scope for self-direction more readily than multi-skill activities.

What we must offer then, on condition that the learners require it, is a balanced combination of skill-specific and multi-skill activities, thereby ensuring *acquisition* of the sub-skills and strategies inherent in communicative competence and actual *use* of discourse in as meaningful contexts as possible.

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